

Happy As a Clam Digger

BY STEPHEN MAY

Robert Spencer's
One O'clock Break,
ca. 1913, shows mill
workers enjoying a
sunny lunch hour.

DURING THE BRILLIANT YEARS OF AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM, American Impressionism flourished in a time of dramatic change. The nation was undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, and artists were fascinated by the flood of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The American Impressionists, however, were not interested in the harsh realities of the day. Instead, they focused on the beauty of the modern city, as well as in the country— but they did so in esthetically pleasing ways. In his cityscapes, Hassam showed grand avenues populated by elegant gentry and marginalized weary coachmen, flower vendors, and women with market baskets. Everett L. Warner captured the hustle and bustle of the Manhattan waterfront in *Along the River Front, New York* (1912), juxtaposing the fre-

sh American Impressionism. The Beauty of Work. An exhibition at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich, Connecticut, through January 8, 2006, organized by guest curator Susan G. Larkm, demonstrates that the upbeat images by these turn-of-the-20th-century artists were largely detached from the harsh realities of their day. The exhibition and its catalogue (published by Frances-L. Lincoln) offer the first comprehensive treatment of the subject of labor in the work of such Impressionist masters as William Merritt Chase, Daniel Garber, Childe Hassam, Willard Metcalf, Theodore Robinson, John Singer Sargent, John H. Twachtman, and F. Alden Wen. These artists chose to idealize and beautify images of workers and factories, often eliminating or hiding potentially disturbing elements under veils of snow, fog, or night.

While studying in Paris in the last quarter of the 19th century, many American Impressionists became interested in depicting everyday life in the modern city, as well as in the country— but they did so in esthetically pleasing ways. In his cityscapes, Hassam showed grand avenues populated by elegant gentry and marginalized weary coachmen, flower vendors, and women with market baskets. Everett L. Warner captured the hustle and bustle of the Manhattan waterfront in *Along the River Front, New York* (1912), juxtaposing the fre-





netic activity of the fish houses and horse-drawn rigs against the Brooklyn Bridge, a towering icon of modern engineering.

Their rural canvases, such as Edward Potbury's depiction of a lad contentedly sharpening his sickle and Wein's *Ploughing for Bucklecat* (1889), in which a Yankee farmer halts his giant red oxen to gaze at his young daughter playing nearby, exemplify "nostalgia for an idealized rural past," writes Larkin in the catalogue.

As they sojourned along the New England coast in the summer, capturing people at ease and at play, some American Impressionists also painted subjects relating to the region's long traditions of shipbuilding and fishing. Hassam depicted men building a schooner, working on a boat, and renovating a railroad bridge over a river. In *Duxbury Clam Digger* (1892), John J. Enneking emphasized the backbreaking nature of this task while capturing the spirit of the small Massachusetts town and its hardworking Puritan founders.

In *U.S. Thread Company Mills, Williamstown, Connecticut* (ca. 1893-97), Wein eliminated intrusive railroad tracks and presented a handsome, sun-splashed, tree-shaded textile factory that harmonized with its natural setting. Garber exploited the coloristic potential of the multi-hued rock patterns of distant quarries along the Delaware River, ignoring the smoke, dust, and machinery required to work them. In fellow Penn-

***Duxbury Clam Digger*,
1892, by John J.
Enneking, depicts
a country youth
laboring in a salt
marsh along the
Massachusetts coast.**

sylvania Impressionist Robert Spencer's *One O'clock Break* (ca. 1913), the mill workers, dwarfed by drab factories, are well-dressed and appear to enjoy a pleasant work environment. The expatriate Sargent, so often associated with society portraits, conveyed his admiration for the arduous task of cutting Italy's famous white stone in *Bringing down Marble from the Quarries to Carrara* (1911).

While the American Impressionists showed women cooking, cleaning, sewing, doing laundry and other domestic chores, their canvases conveyed little of the drudgery of housework. Chase, T.C. Steele, and others featured wash laid lowing picturesquely in breezes, but gave no hint of the hard work preceding such displays. These images are in marked contrast to those created by Ashcan painter John Sloan, which showed working-class women hanging laundry on tenement rooftops or out of windows.

By glossing over the ugliness of industry and exalting manual labor, the American Impressionists reflected the "American attitude toward work as a positive thing," Larkin told *ARTnews*. "It was a means of economic advancement, self-realization, and promoting the common good."

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